

TAMPA TRIBUNE

Post-9/11 Air Defense Gaps Leave Cities on Fringes of Response Time

By TED JACKOVICS | The Tampa Tribune

"The possibility of a surprise air attack on the United States of America – in the view of most of us who've been in this business for a long, long time – is remote. But obviously you have a different viewpoint."

-- U.S. Sen. John McCain, March 21, 1996, to Maj. Gen. Don Shepperd, head of the Air National Guard

TAMPA - Five years before the 9/11 attacks, U.S. Sen. John McCain asked what airborne threats remained after the Cold War.

"Any threat which may come into our airspace," answered Deborah Lee, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, during a Senate subcommittee discussion on air defense.

"Name me an enemy that that could be," McCain responded. "Canada? Mexico? Venezuela?"

Lee's point proved prophetic when a decades-long decline in air defenses left New York and Washington vulnerable Sept. 11, 2001.

On that day, the two East Coast air sovereignty alert sites – among just seven in the continental United States – were spread too thin for fighter planes to intercept the hijacked airliners when commanders determined the flights were part of a terrorist plan.

Since then, a buildup of alert sites to fill gaps between bases where fighter jets stand by to intercept intruders was reduced during the Bush administration from 26 to 18, including sites in Alaska and Hawaii.

That leaves Tampa, Orlando, Dallas and Atlanta among cities at the fringes or beyond the 20-minute interceptor response time the Defense Department established for "areas of interest" after the 2001 terrorist attacks, nonclassified military documents in the public domain show.

Military officials emphasize that response times used in planning can differ from an actual scramble. Variables include the time it takes to launch an interceptor and its speed in an emergency. Commanders also can temporarily shift or add alert sites.

Last line of defense

The nation's last line of defense against airborne threats is now in President Barack Obama's hands.

A number of studies are under way, including the Pentagon's plan for an air sovereignty force that was outlined in a classified report to the Senate Armed Forces Committee on April 7.

Since 9/11, fighter planes have responded to 2,350 possible air threats in the United States, according to an online report from the Continental U.S. NORAD Region at Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City.

The Air Force spelled out vulnerabilities in a 2006 defense industry request for solutions to three scenarios: a cruise missile attack from off the coast of Maryland aimed at a major metropolitan area; a 9/11-style aircraft hijacking; and a civilian aircraft loaded with weapons of mass destruction departing from a Canadian airport.

The project remains under review.

With the exception of a small, bipartisan group of congressmen who took up the cause in 2008, however, interest in the country's air defense mission has gathered little attention since 9/11.

Homeland defense at risk?

Two years ago, Reps. Frank LoBiondo, R-N.J., and Tom Davis, R-Va., along with Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Christopher Bond, R-Mo., said the Air National Guard, which operates 16 alert sites, had been neglected in funding and planning. They questioned whether the cutbacks put homeland defense at risk.

In January 2009, the Government Accountability Office responded: The Air Force, which oversees Air National Guard operations, was focused on other priorities, such as overseas missions for the Guard units that do double duty on air defense alert.

Aging aircraft was another issue, the GAO said. The Air Force faced challenges replacing or extending the service life of fighter aircraft, and by 2020, 11 of 18 air sovereignty alert sites could be without aircraft.

NORAD's commander, Gen. Victor E. "Gene" Renuart, said in an interview with the Tribune last year that he would not support reducing the number of alert sites to fewer than 16 in the continental United States.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command, known as NORAD, is the joint U.S.-Canadian operation that oversees air defense provided primarily by the Air National Guard. It stresses that current air defense exceeds levels available on 9/11.

For example, radar and communications networks have been enhanced, and new missions protect the president and special events such as the Super Bowl and space shuttle launches. Surface-to-air missiles, fighter jets and helicopters now defend Washington. NORAD took on the responsibility for maritime threat warning.

"Following 9/11, we quickly expanded the number of sites to ensure there were no gaps in coverage," Lt. Gen Harry M. Wyatt III, director of the Air National Guard, said at a House Armed Services subcommittee session in 2009.

However, he said, "There are still some who believe we can reduce the number of sites to pre-9/11 levels without any evidence to suggest we will be able to do so in the near future."

In an e-mail Friday, Wyatt said the air alert mission "will remain an enduring requirement."

Better airline security

In a Nov. 18 date e-mail to the Tribune, Lt. Cmdr. Gary Ross, a NORAD spokesman, cited an analysis noting improvements in airline industry security, including "reinforced, locked cockpit doors; improved communications procedures; improved and shared radar coverage; and improved security measures at airports."

Citing security concerns, Ross declined to comment on whether NORAD might relax the 20-minute response time for intercepts established after the 9/11 attacks. He said the agency is evaluating its air defense resources, with an analysis due this spring.

"We are sensitive not to ask for more than what we need, to ensure that resources that could otherwise be used by other commands are used wisely," Ross said.

The GAO's 2009 report did not address the broader air defense mission. But interviews with military and civilian officials and a review of documents reveal anomalies in air defense efforts as well as budget constraints:

- An unclassified portion of a 2004 U.S. Air Force Air University thesis on optimizing alert site locations included a mathematical model showing that a minimum of 26 alert sites are required to provide coverage to 70 U.S. "areas of interest," which were not identified.

In response, the Pentagon says it can augment its 16 basic alert sites within the continental United States if intelligence suggests a higher alert is needed. Canadian forces also provide a pair of alert sites and fighter aircraft for the NORAD mission.

- Eliminating certain alert sites appears to favor budget considerations more than tactical requirements.

Two alert sites added after 9/11, near San Francisco and in Minneapolis, were discontinued; the cities now are covered by sites about 150 miles away.

The Florida Air National Guard, which is responsible for air defense from Charleston, S.C., to Key West and through the Panhandle, no longer keeps planes on alert at its home base at Jacksonville International Airport. Instead, it maintains an alert detachment of at least two F-15s at Homestead Air Reserve Base south of Miami.

In 2002, a pair of F-15s scrambled from Homestead to intercept a teenager, sympathetic to Osama bin Laden, flying a stolen Cessna toward Tampa. A Clearwater-based Coast Guard helicopter reached the plane just before the 15-year-old fatally crashed into the downtown Bank of America building. The F-15s arrived too late.

The most controversial relocation followed a 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommendation to close Otis Air National Guard Base on Cape Cod and relocate an F-15 fighter wing and alert site 140 miles northwest, to Barnes Air National Guard Base in Westfield, Mass.

The commander of the Otis F-15 wing said during closure commission hearings that Cape Cod provided the better alert site because Barnes was in an area with commercial airline flight lanes, which could hinder an F-15 scramble. The government spent \$75 million to relocate the alert site to Barnes, but kept Otis open.

- The Air Force's newest fighter plane, the F-22, with advanced capabilities against cruise missiles and other threats, is not focused on homeland defense, although it will perform air defense missions in Alaska and Hawaii.

The Obama administration halted production of the F-22 last year at 187, choosing to rely on the less expensive F-35 to replace its tactical fighter force and to support U.S. air sovereignty alert missions.

Development delays up to two years, however, could affect the ability to replace F-16s at units with alert missions at Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., and Tucson, Ariz., in addition to replacing the Florida Air National Guard's F-15s.

- Renuart, NORAD's commander, said in March there is no integrated air and cruise missile defense against low-flying aircraft, unmanned aerial systems or vehicles and missiles launched from ships.

U.S. Army War College research in 2007 said at least 70 countries have deployed more than 75,000 cruise missiles and at least 12 countries have exported them, some of which have "fallen in the hands of belligerents."

Under the rationale that no defense is impenetrable, the national security strategy has always emphasized offensive measures and intelligence gathering rather than defensive measures.

"Much emphasis since 9/11 has been placed on airport security and intelligence," said Joseph Jockel, a professor of Canadian studies at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., who has written about U.S. and Canadian air defense issues.

"You don't want to get into a position of having to get a fighter aircraft shoot down an airliner. Do you really want to invest in an air defense web over the United States? I doubt that."

Elinor Sloan, a professor of international relations at Carleton University in Ottawa, author of the newly updated book "Security and Defence in the Terrorist Era," said strategists must determine whether it is more effective to seek security against terrorism at home or abroad.

"My sense is that the alert mission will stay the same or increase in the future," Sloan said.

Budget shrinks

Funding for air defense operations has consistently declined since 2003, in part because of a reduction in costly random air patrols over major cities.

The Pentagon proposed \$253.9 million for air sovereignty alert operations and maintenance for fiscal 2011, plus \$191.6 million for command and control functions. That total constitutes 9.7 percent of the Air Force's proposed operations and maintenance budget.

Historical costs for the alert mission since 9/11 are difficult to compare, in part because of changes in congressional accounting programs and supplemental funding through the years. However, a 2008 Congressional Research Service report said funding for Operation Noble Eagle – which includes fighter and tanker air defense alert costs along with expenditures such as post-attack repairs to the Pentagon – declined to about \$500 million in fiscal 2008 from \$8 billion in fiscal 2003.

Part of the problem, said LoBiondo, the New Jersey congressman, is "public knowledge. It's zero. People don't know anything about the (air defense) shortfall, and the consequences are not talked about.

"The Pentagon has to fully explain with specifics how they intend to deal with the air sovereignty alert mission. It is why I have pressed so hard to get Congress to pay more attention."

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